

Prioritizing Partnerships and Embracing Change

# The Growth and Development of the Denver Afterschool Alliance



## About the Authors

Priscilla M. Little is a senior consultant with the Forum for Youth Investment and the principal author of the Forum's case study report on the Denver Afterschool Alliance. Prior to joining the Forum, she was Initiative Manager for The Wallace Foundation's Next Generation Afterschool System Building Initiative, where she worked closely with nine cities that were working to build and sustain robust OST (out-of-school-time) systems. Central to that work were regular community of practice meetings among the cities, as well as a centralized technical assistance effort to help grantees with core aspects of their system building work. She is a national expert on OST systems and has helped incubate dozens of systems across the country.

Laura Jahromi, Senior Program Associate at the Forum, assisted with data collection, analysis and report writing.

Collaborative Communications contributed to the development, design and production of this brief.

---

## The Denver Afterschool Alliance

The Denver Afterschool Alliance (DAA) is a collaborative – inclusive of the City and County of Denver, hundreds of community-based organizations, Denver Public Schools and local funders – whose vision is that all Denver youth will achieve success now and in the future through active participation in diverse, quality afterschool programs. DAA works in close partnership with key stakeholders to develop and sustain the citywide afterschool system. By bringing together stakeholders and providers and coordinating their efforts, DAA helps ensure that Denver's afterschool system can provide the quality programs that keep young people safe, inspire them to learn and prepare them for the future.

---

## The Forum for Youth Investment

The Forum for Youth Investment is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan “action tank” committed to changing the odds that all children and youth are ready for college, work and life. It provides ideas, services and networks that leaders need in order to make more intentional decisions that are good for young people. The Forum helps leaders increase their capacity to more effectively make the case for and manage the collaborative efforts that are needed to change the odds for youth; improve the alignment and appropriateness of child and youth policy agendas and investments; and strengthen programs' and practitioners' capacity to create environments in which youth thrive, across all the systems and settings where young people spend time.

---

## Collaborative Communications

Collaborative Communications is a strategic communications and consulting firm specializing in education and learning issues. For more than 18 years, Collaborative has worked with educators, policymakers, advocates, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies and community leaders to improve public education and drive changes needed to ensure that all children have access to high-performing public schools and learning opportunities. Collaborative is a recognized leader in working with networks and intermediaries across the country to build partnerships and support the growth of effective afterschool and summer learning programs.

## About This Brief

The Denver Afterschool Alliance (DAA) is an established leader in the Denver community, representing afterschool professionals, children, youth and families to ensure equitable, quality opportunities for Denver's youth.

In 2019, DAA engaged the Forum for Youth Investment (FYI) to develop a case study that traced the origins and development of DAA to generate a set of lessons from which other communities can benefit in their own efforts to coordinate approaches to improving afterschool and summer learning. Led by Priscilla M. Little, senior consultant with the Forum, the nine-month case study inquiry process included extensive internal and external document review, as well as in-depth interviews with past and present DAA leadership and key local and national stakeholders.

This brief is based on the resulting case study. It distills the detailed discussion of DAA's evolution and the lessons learned presented in the case study in order to provide an overview of the main takeaways from DAA's story. In particular, the brief highlights the key approaches to system-building that have informed DAA's growth and describes how DAA developed from an informal collaborative into a nationally recognized afterschool learning system by embracing risk and experimentation in order to continuously improve.

[Access the full-length case study here.](#)

How the Denver Afterschool Alliance strengthens the afterschool and summer learning system in Denver

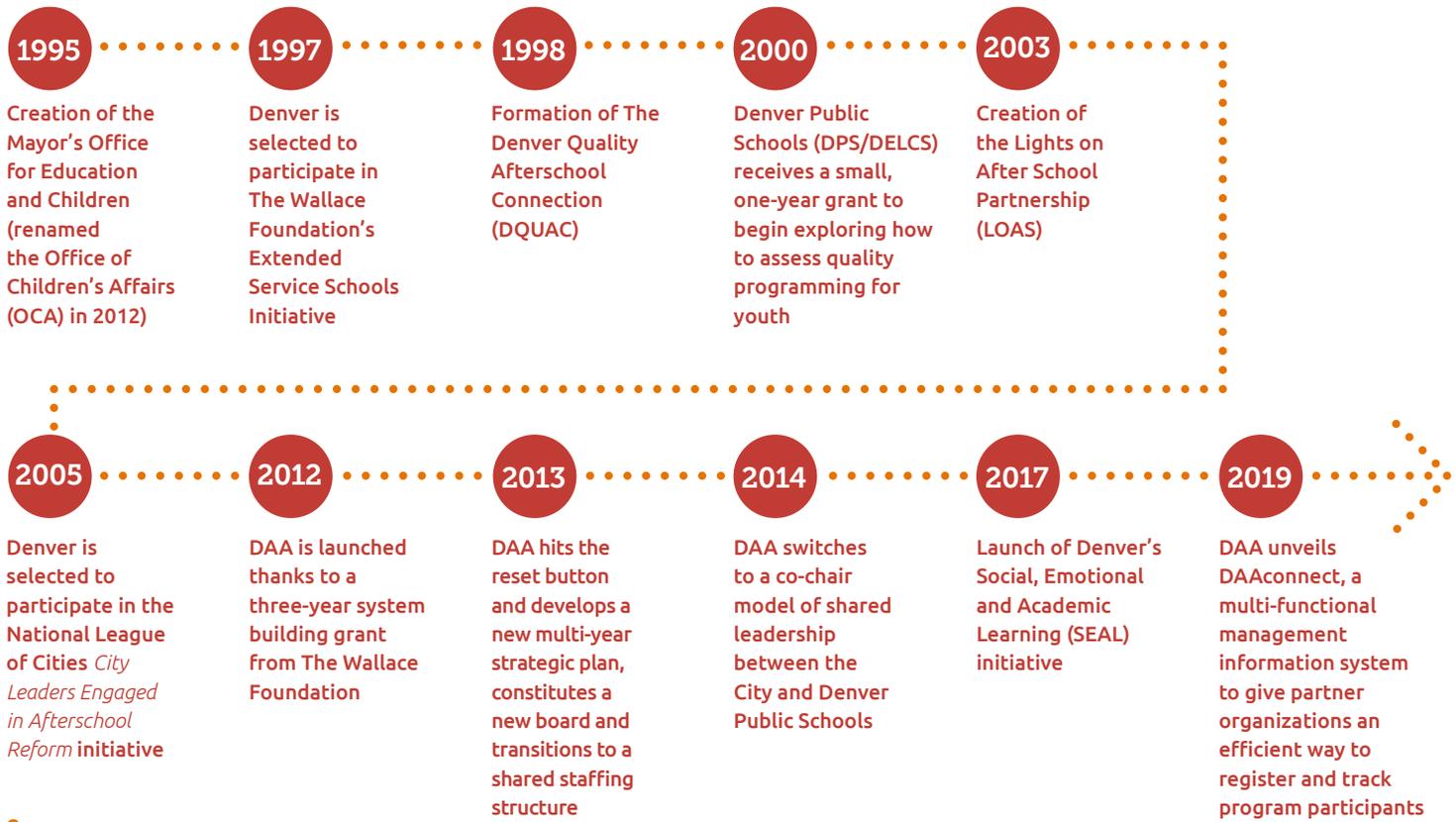
- Offers a free, comprehensive and multi-functional management information system for providers
- Accelerates program quality improvement
- Conducts robust program evaluation
- Advocates for funding for afterschool and summer programs and providers
- Designs and delivers responsive training for all program types and models
- Maintains city-wide program locator tool



# The Grassroots Origins of the Denver Afterschool Alliance

Well before the Denver Afterschool Alliance was formally launched in 2012, a rich history of collaboration and partnerships among the City and County of Denver, community-based afterschool programs and Denver Public Schools (DPS) laid a durable foundation for the robust afterschool and summer learning system Denver has today. Beginning in the 1990s and continuing through the early 2000s, diverse stakeholders in Denver – from the Mayor’s Office and Denver Public Schools to funders and youth-serving organizations in the city – collaborated with increasing consistency and intensity, forming lasting partnerships that would inform citywide systems-building efforts.

## The Development of the Denver Afterschool Alliance: Key Milestones



**“Everybody was just willing to be in it ... it was the mid-level managers and not higher-level managers. We (the mid-level managers) were the ones that ... did things to help each other. There wasn't ego in it, and we talked a lot early on about collaboration versus competition, and we got to collaboration because there weren't egos.”**

–Katherine Plog Martinez, co-founder of DAA and Consultant, Forum for Youth Investment's Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

Notably, in 1998, an informal collaborative network of youth serving organizations convened by Denver Public Schools' Department of Extended Learning and Community Schools (DELCS) formally established itself as The Denver Quality Afterschool Connection (DQUAC), with the goal of promoting quality programming.

Around the same time, a cross-agency effort emerged to coordinate funding. This effort led to the creation of the Lights on After School Partnership (LOAS), in 2003, through which the City and County of Denver, the Denver Public School Foundation and Mile High United Way worked in partnership to promote and scale afterschool and summer programming. The LOAS partnership jointly funded direct service and supported the work of DQUAC to provide professional development and networking opportunities for providers. This partnership also provided support for the Community Schools Planning Group by funding joint evaluation and exploration through the use of quality tools like the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. This combination of direct service, professional development, joint evaluation and exploration is what launched Denver's system-building effort.

In 2005, the City and County of Denver were selected to participate in the *City Leaders Engaged in Afterschool Reform* (CLEAR) initiative, directed by The National League of Cities (NLC), to assess the city's readiness to develop a citywide system to support afterschool programs. Denver was one of six communities selected to participate in Phase Two of CLEAR, during which time NLC provided technical assistance to build out certain key system components. This was Denver's first formal attempt to understand the state of afterschool and summer learning – who was providing what programs, where these programs were provided and who these programs served. This endeavor was seen as innovative by national leaders in the afterschool and summer learning field.

**“Denver's mapping effort to create a program locator stands out as a major success and turning point for the City ... they mapped poverty data from the school district, crime data from the police department, city recreation centers, and they mapped teen pregnancy rates, which back then was pretty cutting edge...they were the only city in the cohort that tapped environmental health data.”**

–Bela Shah Spooner, Institute for Youth, Education and Families, National League of Cities

## Spotlight on The Denver Quality Afterschool Connection

As DQUAC continued to grow and become more sophisticated, its strong provider voice made sure the work was always in line with what the field needed. Additionally, its collaborative nature as an organization with diverse representation from many partners, kept the priorities of providers central. DQUAC was so successful that DAA Founders, who were on the DQUAC steering committee, made a decision to not take it over or merge with it. Instead, the leaders wanted to maintain and protect the work and focus of DQUAC and ensure that they remained by, of and for providers. They also took steps to preserve the collaborative structure and the group's independence from the agendas of others, factors that had made DQUAC successful in the first place.

In 2012, Denver was selected as one of nine cities across the United States to receive a three-year grant from The Wallace Foundation to build out key components of an afterschool and summer learning system. With improving access to quality programming as a guiding objective, the City and County of Denver had two main goals for its three-year system-building strategy:

**By creating DAA, formalize existing relationships between stakeholders and create a unified vision, strategy and core staff to advance quality programs;**

**Develop and launch a community-based data platform that enables stakeholders to map program locations and access reliable information for program improvement and accountability.**



When DAA launched in 2012, housed in the Office of Children’s Affairs with a single director, it adopted a philosophy that embraced the risk of false starts as fundamental to identifying the right approach to the work. Initially, DAA employed a “hub and spoke” model in which the DAA board was the hub, charged with determining *what* work would be done. The spokes, consisting of the provider community (including DQUAC), were empowered to determine *how* the work would be accomplished. However, six months into the launch of DAA, there was a lack of clarity about both the “what” and the “how” as well as uncertainty about the role that everyone was playing.

In response to this challenge, the Board took several months to develop a multi-year strategic plan and sharpen its vision and mission. This enabled DAA to clearly articulate the core work it needed to implement to achieve its ultimate goal of developing a system of supports for Denver afterschool providers so that youth in need would have access to high-quality programs that promote their academic, social and emotional success. The Board also reseeded itself to better align with its strategic goals and have better cross-sector representation including a heavier emphasis on fundraising and policy, as well as those who had influence in their organizations and the community. In addition, DAA transitioned to a shared staffing structure and a co-chair model. Three core staff members from key partner agencies – DPS, the Office of Children’s Affairs and Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver – established a shared staffing structure representing the main stakeholder groups involved in DAA, with board co-chairs from senior leadership at the City and DPS.

### **Three Key Factors in Denver Receiving Funding for Afterschool Systems Building**

When The Wallace Foundation invited Denver to respond to its Request for Proposal for a grant to build a sustainable system, Denver was poised for success. According to Wallace Foundation consultant Sharon Deich (FourPoint Education Partners), DAA had three key selling points that would make it a good fit for the initiative:

- 1 DQUAC was a strong, well-organized and cost-effective provider network.**
- 2 Dedicated city funding could sustain the work when the grant ended.**
- 3 There was a strong history of partnership and the mayor was clearly committed to the work.**



## Leadership Transitions and Growth

After its initial growing pains, DAA established stability in its staff, board and co-chair leadership that enabled meaningful advances in its work. By 2014, DAA and its partners had fully implemented a nuanced and strategic approach to supporting programs' data and quality efforts. They also came to consensus on shared youth outcomes goals for afterschool and summer learning in Denver, which included: growth in academic success, increased engagement in school, growth in social-emotional learning and increased positive youth experiences in afterschool and summer programming.

In 2018, DAA experienced another period of transition following the departure of two key DPS leaders. This transition left the City as the primary-decision maker for nearly a year before reestablishing its co-chair model shared by DPS and the Office of Children's Affairs.

During this period, DAA deftly managed these transitions and kept its work moving forward. As Erin Brown, former co-chair of the DAA board notes, "The city just got in the driver's seat with our program partners and said, 'we are going to do this.' We felt very strongly that we should not slow down and risk losing momentum." This period was also when DPS and DAA jointly received funding from The Wallace Foundation that enabled the launch of Denver's Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (SEAL) initiative, providing for an integrated approach to SEAL instruction, practices, climate and culture.

In maintaining its momentum and building on its successes despite leadership challenges, DAA demonstrated its durability as a collaborative and learned that transitions can set the stage for examining what is working, what is not and how best to move ahead with new personnel, new relationships and new opportunities.

# The Denver Afterschool Alliance Today and Tomorrow

Now, in 2019, DAA supports more afterschool and summer programs than ever before, developing the capacity of providers to continuously improve the quality of the programs they offer and increase access to quality programming for more young people across Denver.

Additionally, DAA has extended its commitment to ensuring that its work responds to the needs of parents and providers and incorporates their input into the design of its tools, resources and supports. Heeding the call for a more robust data management system, DAA launched DAAconnect, a new and improved, multi-functional management information system. DAAconnect provides a user-friendly search engine and gives partner organizations an efficient way to register and track youth participants; it also features an updated program locator and directory search interface to make it more accessible to parents, caregivers and professionals.

This latest innovation in its approach to data exemplifies two core principles that have guided DAA's efforts from the very beginning. First, DAA embraces change and uses it as a springboard for finding opportunities to think and act differently for the benefit of children, youth and families. Secondly, DAA keeps providers at the center of everything it does and every decision it makes. Embracing change and keeping providers at the center requires DAA to "walk the talk" of continuous improvement – seeking input on what's working, what's not working and why – so it can continue to be responsive to its partners, stakeholders and the dynamic environment in which it operates.

With these principles in mind, the challenges that await DAA – some known and others unknown – represent opportunities to take risks in order to innovate, learn from course corrections and channel the can-do spirit that has enabled DAA to sustainably expand and strengthen the afterschool and summer learning system on which families and the Denver community rely.

## The Denver Afterschool Alliance in 2019

**400+**

AFTERSCHOOL  
PARTNERS

**250+**

PARTNERS WITH  
DATA SHARING  
AGREEMENTS

**20,000+**

K-12  
STUDENTS  
SERVED

## The Success of the Denver Afterschool Alliance Can Be Reproduced



Creativity, carefully cultivated partnerships and deep relationships have enabled the Denver Afterschool Alliance to become a national exemplar for the afterschool and summer learning field. However, DAA faces many of the same challenges confronting other communities that are working to build, strengthen and sustain robust systems, such as leadership changes, shifting political contexts and uncertain financial futures. Over the years, DAA has adopted strategies and approaches to the work that are applicable to and suitable for use by other initiatives and communities facing these and other challenges. The following are three main lessons from DAA's evolution. *For a complete set of lessons learned, see the full case study report.*

### **Partnerships Are the Ticket to Success and Sustainability**

Partnerships have been essential to DAA's ongoing success. DAA learned that good partnerships are built on transparency, trust, a shared belief that the partnership should be mutually beneficial and a clear sense of what each partner expects from the relationship. Further, DAA learned it is vital to determine and honor these expectations, as well as to collectively identify the value of the relationship for each partner, talk honestly about what it means to collaborate and share decision-making, and establish a protocol for ensuring that everyone's needs are being met or at least identified.

Written agreements or memorandums of understanding are useful ways to formalize expectations and ensure that, as leadership changes and new people enter into the collaborative, they understand the commitments their organizations have made with regard to being a "partner."

Above all, it is essential to be a good partner in practice, not just on paper, and this requires focused, intentional work. Effective partnerships depend on sufficient and consistent time together to be successful and enable deep engagement in the shared work.

**“Even more important than having the right organization or title is having someone who gets it, works collaboratively and gets the job done. Without the right individuals, the work suffers.”**

–Regan Suhay, Afterschool Provider Liaison,  
Co-founder of DAA

### **Choose Partners Strategically and Cultivate Multi-Level Relationships**

Being a good partner extends to choosing the right people and organizations with whom to partner. As a collaborative by, of and for a community of providers and the afterschool and summer learning field, DAA has been intentional about who is on its board and how to represent a diverse provider community so that it has the right set of partners able to engage in the work and help inform the field.

DAA discovered that determining the difference between getting the right organizational partner and the right human partner is essential; careful consideration should focus on who from an organization will be the best fit for the partnership. In particular, nurturing multi-level relationships and ensuring the buy-in of mid-level leaders is key. High-level leaders, such as mayors and superintendents, are essential to successful systems-building efforts, but they inevitably term-out or change positions. Securing relationships and partnerships with mid-level individuals who have the power to make decisions and keep the work moving is crucial to maintaining continuity and momentum.

### **Stay True to Your Mission, but Be Flexible and Embrace Opportunities to Make New Connections, Change and Iterate**

Establishing a clear mission and vision is empowering for any organization. It provides the fundamental guidance and reference point to inform decision-making and approaches to improvement and growth. With a clearly articulated mission and vision, DAA recognized that it needed to start small and grow incrementally, building a core network of supporters who could champion the work as it progressed. Essential to this growth-oriented model has been DAA's willingness to risk false starts and make course corrections to find the approach that works best.

Central to DAA's approach is the belief that partnerships and governance structures can and should evolve over time in order to best meet the needs of the work and its specific context. DAA took advantage of the departure of its director to reevaluate its organizational structure and shift away from the single director and single chair model that was not working well enough at that time. The change to a shared staffing and co-chair model exemplifies a core lesson about the need to continually assess whether an afterschool and summer learning system is setting itself up for success in the current context of the work.

This kind of flexibility and openness to considering new ways of doing things also enables intermediaries and afterschool and summer learning systems to leverage periods of change as opportunities to take stock, reevaluate partnerships and priorities and make refinements that will strengthen the work. In seven years, DAA has experienced multiple leadership transitions and leadership changes among its other partners. These transitions could have derailed the work, but they didn't. DAA partners, informed by a clear vision and mission, viewed these transitions as opportunities and they prepared to take advantage.

Readiness to embrace new opportunities and openness to innovation is a key contributor to DAA's sustainability, enabling expansion of efforts to include the SEAL initiative (supported by The Wallace Foundation) and tapping into targeted funding streams, such as city tax revenue from the legal sale of marijuana – thereby bringing valuable resources to both the organization and the field.



*Engaging our youth together*